

Stage: 'Evita,' a Musical Peron

By WALTER KERR

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Ambition's Progress

HERE'S an eerily prophetic line close to the very opening of "Evita," the Tim Rice-Andrew Lloyd Webber musical that chooses to sing about the brief, bizarre life of Eva Perón and her joint rule of Argentina with her dictator-husband, Juan. The evening opens with the announcement of her death at 33 — we pick it from the inside of a movie theater, as an ongoing western is suddenly replaced on the screen by the huge shadow of a man proclaiming the news — and then proceeds at once to the state funeral of a woman who was both hated and held to be sainted. Che Guevara — complete with stogie, tam, fatigues and flowing mane — is our guide through the ceremonies. As the great movie screen glides up and away to rest on the back wall, where it will be used to relay real-life snapshots of Eva's worldly progress from backstairs bedrooms to the top of the political heap, Che provides a mocking obbligate to the cries of mourning — cries that have the staccato ring of nails being driven into a coffin.

The lady's coffin is not yet closed, though. That will be done by Che himself, slapping the great lid shut and sending clouds of dust flying into the bleak, steelwork sky. He then sings the couplet that is going to prove both accurate and, to the entertainment, damaging: "As soon as the smoke from the fu-

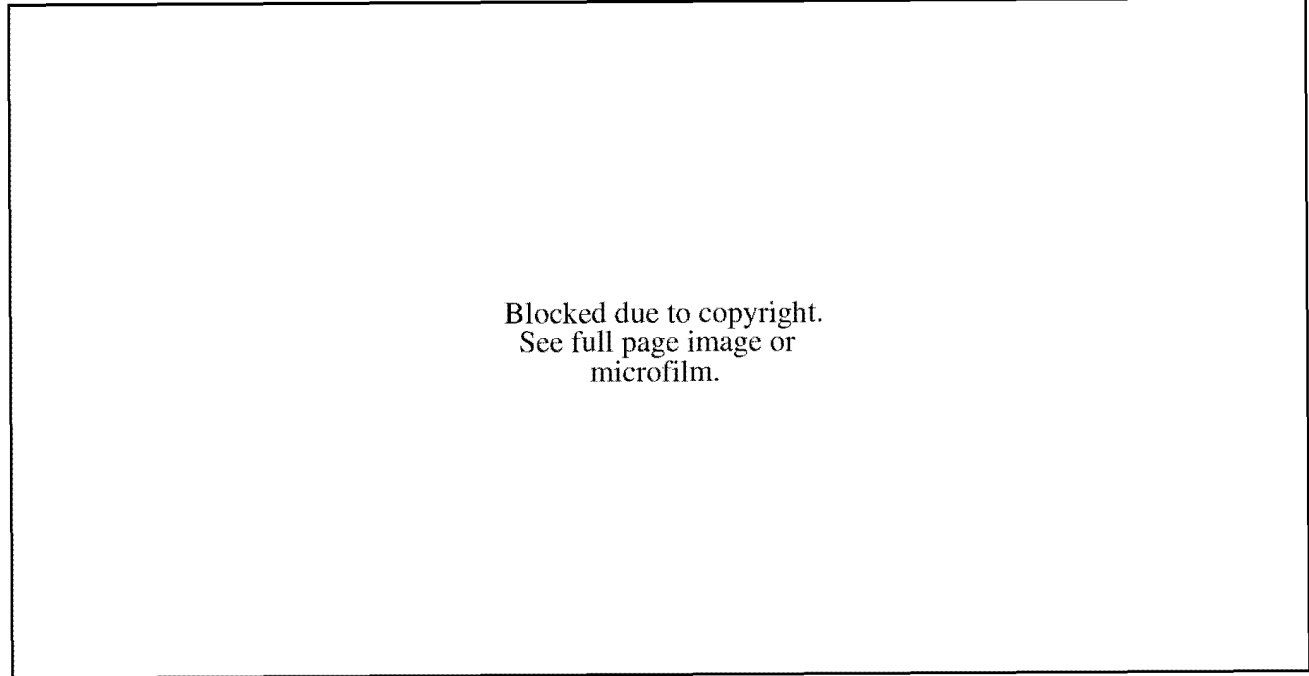
EVITA, a musical with lyrics by Tim Rice; music by Andrew Lloyd Webber; choreography by Larry Fuller; settings, costumes and projections by Timothy O'Brien and Tazeena Firth; orchestrations by Hershy Kay and Andrew Lloyd Webber; musical director, Rene Wiegert; lighting by David Hersey; sound by Abe Jacob; directed by Harold Prince; production stage manager, George Martin. Presented by Robert Stigwood, in association with David Land; R. Tyler Gatchell Jr. and Peter Neufeld, executive producers. At the Broadway Theater, 53d Street and Broadway.

Eva ..... Patti LuPone  
Che ..... Mandy Patinkin  
Perón ..... Bob Gunton  
Perón's Mistress ..... Jane Ohringer  
Magaldi ..... Mark Syers  
The Company .....  
Seda Azarian, Dennis Birchall, Peppi Borza, Tom Carder, Robin Cleaver, Andy DeGange, Mark East, Teri Gill, Carlos Gorbes, Pat Gorman, Rex David Hays, Terri Klausner, Michael Lichtefeld, Carol Lugenbeal, Paula Lynn, Morgan MacKay, Peter Marinos, Sal Mistrretta, Jack Neubeck, Marcia O'Brien, Nancy Opel, Davis Sacks, James Sbrano, David Staller, Michelle Stubbs, Robert Tanna, Clarence Teeters, Susan Terry, Phillip Tracy, David Veeburgh, Mark Waldrop, Sandra Wheeler, Brad Witsger, John Leslie Wolfe, Nancy Wood, John Yost  
Eva (Wednesday and Saturday matinees) .....  
Terri Klausner  
Children .....  
Megan Forste, Bridget Francis, Nicole Francis, Michael Pastryk, Christopher Wooten

neral clears/ We're all gonna see she did nothing for years." That is precisely the problem confronting director Harold Prince and the onetime authors of "Jesus Christ Superstar." As they have charted out the enterprise, Evita is going to use a sleek-haired tango singer to make her way to the big city, she's going to dump him for a succession of more and more important lovers, she's going to snare the mighty man who's about to win Ar-

gentina's lethal game of musical chairs, she's going to pose as a friend of the poor while accumulating an impressive supply of furs and diamond-studded gowns, she's going to be called a whore before she's through, and her body's due to waste away as cancer strikes her early. Yet we almost never see any of these things happen dramatically onstage. We hear about them at second-hand, mainly from the omnipresent Che who slips in and out among the dancers to tell us that dirty deeds are afoot. Whenever Che is briefly silent, we are getting the news from lyrics or recitative sung by top-hatted aristocrats, breathless messengers, almost anyone at hand. It is rather like reading endless footnotes from which the text has disappeared, and it puts us into the kind of emotional limbo we inhabit when we're just back from the dentist but the novocaine hasn't worn off yet.

To be fair, there are at least two passages in which we are really present at a key confrontation. The first occurs when Evita strides peremptorily into Perón's bedroom to dispossess the schoolgirl mistress in residence. "I've just unemployed you," she snaps to the youngster as she snatches her suitcase from beneath the bed and swiftly packs it. It's probably *because* two people have settled something face-to-face that we are so taken with the melodic plaint that follows ("Another Suitcase in Another Hall") as the dispossessed Jane Ohringer sits forlornly on that



Martha Swope

Patti LuPone as Evita and Bob Gunton as Perón in a scene from "Evita," which opened Monday

suitcase in a deserted street, wondering what cast-offs do next. And, near the second act's end, there is a genuine personal clash between Evita and Perón, both pacing from one bedroom to another, she determined on being named Vice President, he bluntly pointing out that her glitter is gone and what's left will soon be ashes. If we ever begin, however remotely, to feel

something for this no-holds-barred opportunist, it is as she crumples to the floor still insisting that half the power is hers. The contest between approaching death and a stubborn will stirs a faint twinge in us, I think, because it's been acted out, fought harshly before our eyes. Otherwise we are condemned to hearing what we want to know — *need* to know, if we're to offer any kind of response — relayed to us by a narrator. The use of Che Guevara for the purpose seems to me approximately as opportunist as Evita's own manipulations. Not because, factually, he wasn't there at the time, had nothing whatever to do with the Peróns. But because he is most often employed to make certain that we won't go developing a crush on Evita ourselves. This last possibility seems a most unlikely one in any case, given what we do know about Eva Perón before entering the theater; it is at once accented by actress Patti LuPone's leering tongue, her firmly set jaw, and the ice water that plainly runs in her veins. (Miss LuPone sings the role well, and moves with a rattlesnake vitality.) But, just to make doubly sure, interlocutor Che (vigorously managed by Mandy Patinkin) is steadily available to sneer ("She's the New World madonna with the golden touch," "She didn't say much/ But she said it loud," and "You let down your people, Evita!"). In effect, this keeps us permanently outside the action, unable to decipher Evita's complexities for ourselves. We ask ourselves, in vain, how this dubious and remote heroine managed to get close enough to Perón to work her will on him, what it was she did to endear herself to a gullible population. Because vital scenes are simply absent, there are no conclusions, no judgments, we can arrive at on our own.

They've all been handed down, hammered down, from the outset. We're not participants, we're recipients of postal cards (and photographs) from all over. Which is a chilly and left-handed way to write a character-musical. The evening is not boring. Though the Rice-Webber score sometimes sounds as though Max Steiner had arranged it for Carmen Miranda, there are waltzes and polkas and threatening marches to keep us alert for tricky tempo-shifts; the lyrics, however, lack the odd and very human perceptions that often distinguished "Jesus Christ Superstar." Bob Gunton is a more interesting Perón than you'd expect to find in such company, largely because he's a man of several minds, brutal enough privately but strangely wary about the insecurities of public life. And director Prince has put his customary firm mark on the staging, making economical, highly efficient use of placards, banners, torches and bodies as he conducts the Peróns through their open-air rallies and ostentatiously glittering inaugurations. Evocative use is made, in collaboration with choreographer Larry Fuller, of squared-off blocks composed of slithering upper-crust figures and thumpingly booted army men eluding one another in counterpoint. And the thunder of the open-throated choruses at the Broadway is massive enough just possibly to be heard in Argentina. If your curiosity stays alive at "Evita" in spite of all the undramatized hearsay that isn't going to satisfy it, it's due to the authoritative crackle of ringmaster Prince's whip. Listen, the whip says. You listen. And go home wondering why the authors chose to write a musical about materials they were then going to develop so remotely, so thinly.